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ABSTRACT

The television industry is being dramatically transformed by new communications technology that in the coming decade will offer opportunities and dangers limited only by the imagination and wisdom of those producing television's artistic product and those regulating the proliferation of that product. The most dramatic and profoundly important advance in the history of communications has been the invention and improvement of television. Television has developed into a medium, however, where every second means revenue, and television artists face a different set of constraints from artists who communicate in other ways. Those constraints include getting a 30% share of the viewing audience, engaging an audience predisposed to passivity, and dealing with market researchers and network executives whose goals are fundamentally different from those of the artists. It is not the heavy hand of federal regulations, but the hand of a conforming market that today limits television's potential. Television must offer a genuine choice to the artist who seeks to explore new insights and techniques and to the viewer who seeks a program suited to individual needs, tastes, and schedules. (AEA)

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"THE NEW TELEVISION: CHANGING THE MEDIUM, ENRICHING THE MESSAGE"

An Address by
CHARLES D. FERRIS
CHAIRMAN, FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Before the Forum Luncheon of the
ACADEMY OF TELEVISION ARTS AND SCIENCES
Los Angeles, California
THURSDAY, MAY 24, 1979
12:00 NOON P.S.T.

When I was a boy growing up in Boston, my friends and I could spend entire winter afternoons lost in the fantasy worlds of science fiction writers. We assumed that such worlds literally were fantastic--with their machines that could think; with their voyages across time and space; with their technological sweep through far-fetched notions, from heart transplants to radios with screens. Looking back, I now see that the most gifted of these writers used fantasy as a way of exploring the difficult and fundamental questions such advances would raise. In some of their imagined societies, the technology was harnessed for good, for a triumph over evil, or perhaps to end such things as blight or poverty or war. In others, technological devices empowered the forces of totalitarianism to exert truly total control.

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Yours is the first generation of artists to experience fully what was only a fantasy before. Soon, very soon, we will live in one of the better, or one of the lesser, worlds of these yesteryear imaginations. The technology you will use or misuse, like the technology imagined by science fiction writers, will offer our society a critical choice. It will be exploited to dehumanize mankind, or to expand the opportunities of our common humanity. The artists and technicians of today's television will set the course for what tomorrow's television will mean to society.

The explosion of communication technology in the coming decade will offer opportunities and dangers limited only by our imagination and our wisdom. I say <u>our</u> imagination and wisdom because the policies we pursue at the FCC in the next few years will very much affect the range of possibilities within your reach, for both the near and distant future. If we are wise in our policy choices, your imaginations will be free to seek and find new avenues of expression. These new avenues will provide the stimulus and stock the market for new thoughts, for even deeper insights into the human spirit. This is the promise of the communications revolution, but it is a promise that can be lost even as it looms.

The future can offer a great deal to you as artists and to the American public as viewers if we together seize the opportunities that will be opened. At the FCC we can devote our efforts to freeing your energies from artificial bindings--and we will. Available technology can be liberated from excess regulation, opening the broadcast industry to competition and diversity--and that will be done. But in the end, it will be your artistic product upon which history will pass the decisive judgment.

From the beginning, radical changes and refinements in the modes of communication have enabled increasing numbers of persons to explore the words and ideas of others. William Shakespeare had less influence on his own society that the Fonz has on ours, and certainly this cannot be explained by the relative power of their words or ideas. It is rather simply because more people see Happy Days each week than have ever seen a live performance of a Shakespearian play in four centuries. Such is the power of television--that more people can have more access more instantly to the same artistic experience than ever before. Such is also the question of television--what will the quality of that experience be?

The history of communications has been the history of mankind. Technological breakthroughs have continuously expanded the audience for fresh and challenging ideas. Guttenberg's press brought the printed word, and with it the essential precondition of the Reformation and the scientific revolution that followed. Radio brought isolated Americans into the mainstream of national life--and the warm tones of the first fireside chats into the living rooms of the Great Depression.

There is little question, though, that the most dramatic and profoundly important advance in communications has been the invention and improvement of television. Most of us in this room have seen television since its infancy. The development of television has not merely been rapid--it has been phenomenal. In the first years after the second world war, only one in every one hundred homes had a television set. Within ten years, three out of four homes did. Today, the percentage of homes with one or more televisions is roughly equal to the percentage of homes with indoor plumbing--

and as between the two, many Americans would find it nearly impossible to choose.

In a very short period of time, television has become a dominant force in our society, if for no other reason than that it touches so many millions each hour of every day. What other form of mass communication is considered unsuccessful if it does not attract a share of the audience representing tens of millions of persons? A musical group is honored by a gold album if it sells the latest L.P. to a million buyers. A novelist reaches the top of the best seller list if a mere half-million persons buy his or her book, while a very few newspapers can claim a daily readership even approaching this number. With the notable exception of Reader's Digest, the only magazine that comes close to the audience television claims is a magazine about--what else--television. Yet even T.V. Guide's circulation figure--an impressive 18 million worldwide--would bring embarrassment and quick cancellation to a prime time network show.

The incredible reach of television--from studios in Hollywood and New York into the homes of almost all Americans--is an awesome extension of the power of communication. This is an astounding reality. But it is also a depressing one, because you and I know that unless the message can capture a thirty per cent share, none of the networks would take a chance on it.

You operate under a wholly different set of constraints than artists who communicate in any other way. On a medium where every second means revenue, you must face extreme time limits. An author of books or articles may feel free, within very broad limits, to expand on an idea in many

different ways. Television often seems to imitate an idea, or to repeat it over and over in series that clone one another, but seldom to expand on ideas in a meaningful sense.

You must engage a viewing audience predisposed to passivity, an audience that has come to expect relaxation and accept escapism, rather than even mild intellectual challenge. You are asked to create a new reality for viewers who are exhausted by their own, who are often already too aware of the agonies and ironies of life.

But perhaps your most oppressive burden is the state of cold war that exists between you and those who ultimately control your creativity. You must deal not only with artificial lead time, deadlines, and schedule changes, but with market researchers and network executives whose goals are fundamentally different from your own. Your best work may be rejected simply because it is too innovative, too daring--in short, too good.

Some might say that these complaints come with the television turf--that this is simply the way things are and necessarily must be. I strongly disagree, and I am committed to proving that the pessimists are wrong. It may be the way things are today, but that is only because we have chosen this way among the many possible ones of structuring the industry.

Maybe I am still too fascinated by the world of science fiction, but I believe that the future offers us a better way, a way out of the sterile box that confines your creativity, a way to develop the still latent possibilities of television. This prospect is the promise of communications history.

Each dramatic revolution in communication technology--from the development of language and script to television broadcasting--has stimulated new forms of thought, expression, and even experience. Advances in one medium have not only opened a new path of creative communication, but have forced as well other media of communication to respond to new competitive circumstances. When television reached maturity, the movie industry was forced by the growing popularity of television to make better films, to narrow the gap between the art films once aimed only at a small audience and the general run of motion pictures.

The revolution of the 1980's will not break with this historical trend. It too will expand the opportunities for artist and audience alike. As technologies like satellites, fiber cable, and videodiscs become widely available, the opportunities and the rewards for creativity will multiply. There will be room and incentive for many more hours of new programming on new channels and limitless hours on videodiscs. There will be room and incentive within these hours for experiments in new formats, for more fulfilling and effective ways to depict the ironies, the agonies, and the joys of our experience.

Those of you who have seen your best ideas sacrificed upon the altar of the ratings competition soon will find room for risky and controversial ventures--and you will find a market willing to reward your efforts.

But if we are to grasp this opportunity for the coming decades, we must make the proper policy choices today. The proper choice is not always the easiest to perceive or to carry out. Some have urged the Congress and the FCC to require the networks to provide certain types of programs at certain hours.

To be frank, I have grave concerns about government second-guessing of specific network programming decisions. We must remember the simple truth that government power over programming most often becomes the power to impose conformity.

What can the government properly do to promote the public's interest in diverse and meaningful programming? If it cannot, and should not, directly ban or prescribe specific programs, then we must depend primarily on the pressures and incentives of the market to elicit what we want and need from television. Yet the broadcasting market has had precisely the opposite effect: it has encouraged sameness and rewarded caution. We have asked for inspiration, and we have received the moral equivalent of The Gong Show. The potentially chilling effect of government regulation is more than matched in practice by the chilling effect of the Nielsen ratings.

It is now becoming clear that free speech can be surrendered to market pressures as easily as it can be subverted by government. Today, commercial competition for the broadest possible audience has stilled divergent voices and left us largely with the monotone of commonly held values and viewpoints.

I believe that the First Amendment means much more than the right of each sit-com to be endlessly spun-off. It means that dignity and human worth come from the open exchange of controversial ideas and criticism. It means that the human spirit should be refreshed by thoughts and ideas contrary to the conventional wisdom, by criticism that is effective because it sometimes angers and enrages. It means that the majority must not only respect the minority but learn from it as well. It means that artists have not only an abstract right but real access to free expression.

It is not the heavy hand of government but the all too visible hand of a conforming market that today limits your talents. Yet, if we make the proper policy choices today, you can become freer artists in a freer market with greater diversity and responsibility.

There are many examples of television's excellence, from Roots to Holocaust to 60 Minutes. But we also need to ask how often in the daily average of seven hours of viewing we are called upon to search our souls and our minds, to rethink old ideas and prejudices, to reconsider and reshape our understanding of the world. Sadly, it is not often.

There is ample room on the airwaves for relaxation and pleasure. But we must have a broader vision of television, a vision of a time when television will offer a genuine choice--for the artist who seeks to explore new insights and techniques--and for the viewer who seeks a program suited to his or her individual needs, tastes, and schedule.

I know you share this vision. Yet the choices do not exist for you, and so they cannot exist for viewers. Ninety percent of broadcast time continues to come from three networks locked in a battle for the attention--or the half attentive glance--of the "average viewer."

Let me say something about this average viewer. No such individual exists, except as a construct suited to the current structure of broadcasting. The real viewers are people who want something interesting on television but will settle for what is on. They are people increasingly dissatisfied with current programming but who watch out of habit. The average viewer is a concept created by the commercial compulsion to capture one-hundred percent of the audience, down to the last decimal point. This mindless pursuit has

lead the networks to round off to the lowest common denominator, to deny the diversity of which we are otherwise so proud, and to justify it all by the law of averages.

Instead of a system that thrives on the rich differences among us, we have chosen a broadcasting system that denies viewers their distinctiveness and your community a chance to create rather than imitate. Creativity lies in seeing things differently, not in seeing averages.

We are becoming more creative at the FCC, because we see things differently than we have in the past. The new technologies offer us a chance for a new television of competition, innovation, and diversity.

In the face of aggressive competition from other programming sources, success may come to mean a 10 percent share of the audience, an audience that would still be over 20 times as large as the readership of Harpers or Atlantic. But it will be a share earned by imagination and thoughtful programming decisions, not by dominant market power. Networks and other programmers will have to become much more sophisticated and selective in their choice of audience.

In short, I believe we can have diversity in the market by allowing the structure of the market to encourage diversity. Then and only then will American television become a fertile field for fresh programming.

I believe as John Kennedy believed that there is "little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him." Ultimately, the success of television will depend upon the quality of your ideas, your efforts--and your opportunities. I pledge you my continued efforts to see that the opportunities are there. It will be up to you to provide the substance to fill them.